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LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA ACTION OFFICERS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KCOR](#) [CM](#)
SUBJECT: THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY: TRACING CAMEROON'S
POLITICAL UNDERCURRENTS

REF: A. YAOUNDE 211 AND PREVIOUS
[1](#)B. 07 YAOUNDE 1315
[1](#)C. 07 YAOUNDE 1236
[1](#)D. 07 YAOUNDE 1069
[1](#)E. IIR 6 825 0027 08

Classified By: Poloff Tad Brown for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (S) Summary. President Biya has reason to believe that powerful political barons worked to manipulate the population's genuine political-economic frustrations in order to cultivate instability in more than 30 Cameroonian cities during the week of February 25 (ref a). Amid the conflicting accounts of which ministers are conspirators or loyalists and reports of mysterious white vans distributing motivational cash to rioters, there is an element of truth: the apparent monolith that rules Cameroon--the cabinet, the ruling party and even Biya's Beti ethnic group--is in fact cleaved by shadowy and shifting political networks, competing subtly but meaningfully, vying for advantage in the contest to replace or succeed Biya. These political "tectonic plates" are too obscure to ever pin down definitively, but this cable seeks to outline what we perceive to be their contours, to help policy-makers understand and react to the movements behind Cameroon's political evolution. End summary.

[1](#)2. (S) Post conceives of two large groupings of prominent Cameroonians actively seeking to gain the upper-hand in determining the course of post-Biya Cameroon, to which we have given in-house euphemisms: the Elders and the Upstarts. Additionally, we perceive that many senior figures are unaffiliated, either because of their unwavering loyalty to President Biya or because they are uninvolved in the politicking, more interested in pursuing their personal enrichment or doing their jobs. We call these latter two groups the Faithful and the Unaffiliated.

The Elders
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[1](#)3. (S) The "Elders" group is characterized by senior national leaders, many of whom have participated in governing Cameroon since the Ahidjo era, who are planning for the post-Biya era but not seeking to rush events. Perhaps more than anything, the overarching uniting goal for the Elders is their abhorrence for the more radical and power-hungry nature of the Upstarts. The Elders are more legalistic, with a greater understanding of the responsibilities of governing and statesmanship. They privilege stability and predictability, would be content to follow Biya's timeline, and likely seek to gain his blessing to succeed him. Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Justice Amadou Ali is the most prominent member of the group and most likely candidate for succession, and Ali's pursuit of corrupt officials and businessmen ("Ali's list," ref c) was the first indication of

the fault lines within Cameroon's ruling circles. We perceive that Philomen Yang, Assistant Secretary General at the Presidency, is part of this group (and would be a likely successor to Inoni if he is dismissed). We believe that two previous Prime Ministers (and Anglophones), Simon Achidi Achu and Peter Mafany Musonge, ascribe to the Elders. Other likely members include: General Benoit Emame Asso'o (currently hospitalized in South Africa) and Rene Claude Meka, the Chef d'Etat Major of the Armed Forces, both of whom are believed to disdain Minister of Defense Ze Meka. We believe that the Elders' supporters in the armed forces include the Chief of Staff at the Gendarmerie Oumarou Djam Yaya, a Northerner.

The Upstarts

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¶4. (S) Although they also include a number of government veterans, the Upstarts is a grouping of powerful figures who are characterized by their relative youth, their spectacular corruption, and their impatience with Biya's lengthening rule. This group is more comfortable with the idea of forcing Biya's hand (and perhaps him from the scene) in order to assure their ascendancy. We believe this group is the reality behind what the Cameroonian press has identified (but never with credible specificity) as a clique of officials seeking to prepare for post-Biya that it calls G11 (pronounced "Jay Onze," in reference to 2011, the year when this generation hopes to take power).

¶5. (S) Former Minister of Finance Akame Mfoumou, who was quickly dismissed following too much public speculation that he was Biya's chosen successor, is a likely eminence grise of the group since a number of its supposed members, especially

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former Minister of Finance and corruption kingpin Polycarpe Abah Abah, rose to power under his patronage. The Upstarts include at least one powerful member of the current cabinet: Minister of Defense Remy Ze Meka. Biya dismissed a substantial portion of the Upstarts that were in his previous cabinet in the September 2007 reshuffle, including: former Finance Minister Polycarpe Abah Abah, former Minister of Finance and Secretary General at the Presidency Jean Marie Atangana Mebara, former Minister of Health Urbain Olinguena Awono, and former Minister of Communication Gervais Mendo Ze.

¶6. (S) The Upstarts include the preponderance of powerful Beti figures, evincing their fear that Biya will be forced to pass the mantle to a non-Beti successor. General Roland Mambou Deffo, the head of Internal Security at the Gendarmerie in the Ministry of Defense and an ethnic Bamileke, is believed to align himself with the Upstarts. There are tantalizing connections between Yves Michel Fotso, the son of self-made billionaire Victor Fotso and current head of the Commercial Bank of Cameroon (CBC) empire, and leading members of the Upstarts, including Abah Abah (who ran at least two of his corrupt operations through CBC banks) and Ze Meka, who has been seen socializing with Fotso. The Upstarts, and Ze Meka in particular, are said to be behind the October 2007 rumors of a planned coup (ref b), which resulted in the jailing of at least a dozen military officials of northern origin. Additionally, Ze Meka is said to have been remarkably unresponsive to Biya's orders to reestablish stability in the face of violent unrest during the week of February 25, leading many to speculate that he or his allies played a role in fomenting the troubles (ref e).

The Faithful

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¶7. (S) In some ways the distinction between the Faithful and the Elders may be artificial, but we perceive that some officials have positioned themselves so loyally to Biya that they would not entertain the thought of participating in post-Biya planning. The Secretary General at the Presidency,

Laurent Esso, seems to epitomize this position. We believe he is thoroughly corrupt, relatively anti-American and pro-French, and essentially conservative. As a trained engineer (in petroleum engineering) who was promoted through the bureaucratic ranks, however, Esso appears to be remarkably apolitical, perhaps explaining why Biya brought him to the Presidency in the September 2007 cabinet shuffle. Ama Tutu Muna, the Minister of Culture and a close Embassy contact, has proven herself to be a faithful and unapologetic admirer of President Biya. Although from a prestigious and historically political family, Ama Muna herself came to politics from the private sector. In a recent conversation with the Ambassador, she praised Esso while damning the lead members of the Upstarts. We could conceive of Ama Muna joining the Elders, except that her praise for Esso does not jibe with comments from Ali's counterparts who castigate Esso, and she seems dispositionally incapable of calculating post-Biya. Secretary General of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) Rene Sadi is regularly mentioned as one of Biya's most trusted advisors. Biya dismissed speculation that Sadi was his chosen successor in a past conversation with the Ambassador, but Sadi is likely to be closer to Biya than to any of the members of the competing cliques. Ambassador Martin Belinga Eboutou, recently brought back from the UN to be a Special Advisor at the Presidency, is also perceived to have Biya's trust. Absent from the scene for so long, Belinga is likely to be more loyal to Biya than to any competing networks and is, perhaps, one of Biya's most trusted advisors at this moment. Another Presidential advisor, Foumane Akame, the older brother to Akame Mfoumou (the Upstarts' eminence grise) is thought to be faithful to Biya and in open disagreement with his younger brother's plotting.

The Unaligned =====

18. (C) We do not believe that all senior officials are engaged in this struggle: some are too professional, focused on fulfilling their mandates, or corrupt, focused on stealing what they can in the short term, to engage in the underlying political battles. Freshly arrived from working with the IMF in Washington, D.C., Finance Minister Essimi Menye was recruited for his qualifications and competency more than his partisanship or loyalty. Essimi Menye told the Ambassador that he supported Biya's efforts to change the constitution in hopes that it would tamp down the jockeying for succession that Essimi Menye regarded as a distraction from more important business. Similarly, Fuh Calistus Gentry,

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Secretary of State at Ministry of Mines, was brought in the

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class of September 2007 ministers for his technical expertise. (Fuh has a distinguished career in the private mining sector.) Fuh is from the North West Province and likely has higher political ambitions, but has not yet risen to the level where he would be recruited by one of the competing camps.

What About These Guys? =====

19. (S) Jean Baptiste Bokam, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defense for the Gendarmerie: The fact that he serves with Ze Meka in the Ministry of Defense (a sensitive ministry, where Biya is known to place individuals who will balance, not collude with, each other) argues that Bokam is not a member of the Upstarts, but his presence on Ali's "list" suggests that he is not in Ali's camp either. He is believed to be corrupt and ruthless (according to comments by Cameroon's financial crimes watchdog). His status as a rare East Province native with national power may lead him to be among the faithful, remaining loyal to Biya until the President has indicated his anointed next steps.

¶10. (S) Ephraim Inoni, Prime Minister: Inoni is generally perceived to be more of a technocrat than a politician, but the up-tick in reports of his supposed corruption suggests that he is becoming an increasingly polarizing figure. Inoni's feud with Abah Abah was personal and passionate, and sources report that Ali kept Inoni off the "list of billionaires" because Ali "is friends" with Inoni (who had worked for Ali at the Presidency). Growing rumors that Inoni will be dismissed in the next cabinet shuffle, however, may force Inoni to ally (if he has not already) with whomever he feels will best protect his future prospects.

¶11. (S) Hamidou Yaya Marafa, Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization: Marafa previously confided to the Embassy his ambitions to become President, but it is difficult to know where his affiliations lie in this fight. Marafa was reportedly furious that Ali included him on the list of officials to be investigated, and Ali specifically mentioned Marafa as a target of interest in a private conversation with Emboffs. (Ali lumped Marafa in in the same group as Abah Abah, Mebara, Mendo Ze, and Olanguena (ref d).) Nevertheless, we are reluctant to include Marafa among the Upstarts because he seems unlikely to align himself with those more radical and self-serving agitators, and his status as a northerner with national ambitions (something anathema to the Beti, who feel that a President from the North will seek revenge against the Beti for the aftermath of the 1984 coup), makes him all the less likely to associate with the Beti-dominated Upstarts.

¶12. (C) A. E. Mebe Ngo'o, General Delegate for National Security (DGSN): There is some debate as to whether Mebe Ngo'o and Abah Abah (who share a hometown, Zoetele, in the Beti homeland) are thick as thieves or at knives drawn. Press reports shedding light on their efforts to discredit each other and sources in Zoetele tell us that Mebe Ngo'o argued for Abah Abah's dismissal from the cabinet, meaning that Mebe Ngo'o is unlikely to associate himself with the Upstarts. As a Beti, however, Mebe Ngo'o is unlikely to team up with the Elders, who have a Northerner, Ali, as a leading contender for national leadership.

¶13. (C) Gregoire Owona: Some sources place Owona with the Upstarts, and Ali included Owona on his list, suggesting Owona does not enjoy Ali's support. Owona's reputation as being relatively reform-minded and his position as they point person for Biya's agenda to reform the constitution, however, make it difficult for us to place him with the rebellious Upstarts.

Location, Location, Location (=Ethnicity)
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¶14. (C) Despite Cameroonians' proud boast that their country is too ethnically diverse to suffer from tribal politicking on a national scale, the fact is that ethnicity plays a central role in these power struggles. One analysis holds that Cameroon's 200 ethnic groups can actually be boiled down to three that matter: the Beti-Bulu (in the Center and South Provinces; they are not numerous, but are powerful and rich beyond proportion through Biya's rule); the Northerners (who are numerous, relatively but not totally united, and who have experience ruling the country) and the Bamileke (who wield little apparent political power but are believed to control the nation's economy). Around these

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three groups, this theory holds, the smaller ethnic groups (e.g., the Bassa outside of Douala, the Easterners, the Anglophones) will align themselves to one of the emerging blocks, likely following the most persuasive national member of their own group. Above all else, leading members of the Beti elite are said to agree that a Northerner can not be allowed to succeed Biya, for fear that it would unleash vengeance-seeking for the post-1984 violence and prosecution

and persecution of the Betis' corrupt excesses.

Where is the USG Interest?

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¶15. (S) Any such effort to divine the intentions of Cameroon's most astute political operators is bound to raise as many questions as it answers; our fundamental purpose is to sketch a construct to help policy-makers navigate the turbulent waters of Cameroon's power politics. Biya's next cabinet shuffle will likely be decisive, and there are some indications to suggest that he is already moving to weaken the Upstarts: the September 7 shuffle dismissed many of them, and RUMINT indicates Biya is aware of and angered by Ze Meka's machinations. This is likely good news for Cameroon and American interests, as Ze Meka, Abah Abah and their ilk had already proven their reckless willingness to ransack the treasury and jeopardize the nation's security apparatus in pursuit of their personal agendas. Nevertheless, we must not confuse the Elders' conservatism for enlightenment or uprightness. In the long term, our interest is to move this political wrangling into the public sphere, where the Cameroonian polity can choose the leadership of their country. In the short term, our interest is to strengthen those who are most likely to shepherd Cameroon towards a more stable but also more democratic and prosperous future.
GARVEY